

# U.S. Soldier awarded Germany's Medal of Honor

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By **C. Todd Lopez**



WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Dec. 9, 2011) -- In combat, it doesn't make a difference what language your allies speak -- every Soldier who fights alongside you is like a brother, said a German who was saved by Americans in Afghanistan.

The German government highlighted that reality of war, Dec. 8, when Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany Peter Ammon presented Staff Sgt. Peter Woken with the German Medal of Honor for Gallantry in Action -- an award similar to the American Silver Star.

Woken's actions were instrumental in saving the life of German Cpl. Tim Focken, Ammon said. Addressing Woken's wife and two sons who attended the ceremony, he told the family an entire nation is thankful for the actions of the noncommissioned officer.

"The German government and the German people are deeply grateful for your husband and your father," Ammon said. "He will be the first American to receive the German Medal of Honor for Gallantry in Action here in the U.S. You can be proud."

Ammon pinned the medal on Woken's uniform. The sergeant, now part of the Warrior Transition Unit at Fort Hood, Texas, is the first American to receive the medal on American soil. Seven other American Soldiers involved in saving Focken's life also received the medal, though it was presented to them in theater by German Minister of Defense Dr. Thomas de Maizière.

Woken had said that he views the recognition as confirmation of what Soldiers know about their comrades -- that soldiering together unites servicemen across language and nationality.

"Even though Germany is honoring me this way, I think what they are conveying is that we are all brothers," Woken said. "This type of award generally doesn't go to Americans. It will go to Germans on German soil. We feel the same

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way -- they are fighting the same enemy that we are, and we are all brothers."

Focken said the same -- to an infantryman, uniform, language and nationality make no difference if you're fighting on the same side.

"We've had a lot of battles, and we've fought side-by-side with 10th Mountain," he said. "There was never a discussion on who is there to help who and to save who. It's basically like brothers, and if anybody needed help, nationality doesn't matter. You're there to help."

On Oct. 7, 2010, a German ground patrol at Qala-ye Zai, Afghanistan, came under enemy fire -- Focken was shot in the conflict. After receiving immediate medical assistance from German Army medics, Focken boarded an American Black Hawk helicopter, where flight medic Woken tended to the injured Soldier's wounds during travel to a military hospital.

The action in Afghanistan that earned him the award was typical of what combat medics like Woken are called upon to do as many as 10 times a day. The Soldier said he'd performed so many rescues that he's lost count. "I had stopped counting at 357," he said. "At that point it was becoming kind of redundant to even count."

Originally from Tacoma, Wash., Woken said teams like his are on call for 48 hours at a time with 24 hours of down time between. On that day in Afghanistan, his team was waiting in a "relaxed state," he said, to conserve energy until they got the call to do a rescue. Then, he said, "we went from basically zero to 100 in a matter of minutes."

"We were flying about as fast as we could go to the scene," he said. "We were told there were troops in contact. Once we got there we overflowed the scene one time. Normally we will do a high recon and then a low recon. And we only did one low recon and we landed. I guess our pilot chose to not do a full landing. We took off due to safety reasons."

Woken said the crew onboard the aircraft decided quickly to land again to pick up the injured German Soldier -- personal risk is not part of the equation when you are trying to save somebody's life, he said.

"A flight medic shouldn't feel like they are taking a risk whatsoever," Woken said. "You have to think that God has your back, and you have the back of the Soldier on the ground."

Woken said the Black Hawk stayed on the ground for less than a minute before Focken was onboard. Focken had been on the ground leading a team of three Soldiers when he got injured.

"Our job was to go into the town, Qala-ye Zai, to do recon," Focken said. "We got there early so our company commander could do HUMINT and recon. My three Soldiers and I were on the compound roof securing the perimeter. About a half hour after we got into Qala-ye Zai, heavy fighting broke out, with the Taliban insurgents firing. After about one and half hours of intense fighting, a sharpshooter picked me off the roof."

Focken was hit in the left shoulder. "I was talking to one of my guys when I got shot," he said. "It felt like a bolt of electricity going through my arm."

He was able to maintain order among his Soldiers even after he was shot, and his Soldiers applied aid to try to stop his bleeding. Once on the ground, a German medic tended to his wound, and then he was able to get to the helicopter.

"His attitude was probably one of the best I've seen out of any injured Soldier," Woken said. "He was still in top physical condition. He was able to jump into the helicopter even though it was three and a half feet off the ground. He was able to speak with me and explain how he was feeling. And at the end of the mission he walked off the helicopter."

Both Woken and Focken were present at the ceremony -- brought together for the event by the German government. The two had not been in contact with each other since Focken departed Woken's Black Hawk in Afghanistan in 2010.

"I get to meet the only person I've ever MEDEVACed from any theater," Woken said of the opportunity. "Normally I'll get my patient, I'll take care of them on the aircraft, then they walk away. I never hear or see from them again. This morning I got to meet Cpl. Tim Focken and start a relationship. It provides a lot of closure for me."

For Focken, he got a chance to say thank you to one of the American Soldiers that helped save his life. "It's a great thing to say thank you personally to Sgt. Woken and to his crew that saved me."

Ammon said the award ceremony was about more than just a medal -- he said it was about an enduring friendship between two allied nations.

"Today is more than just paying tribute to the bravery of one courageous serviceman who saved a fellow Soldier," Ammon said. "Today we also celebrate the lasting vitality of our alliance in challenging times -- an alliance that has roots going back to the American revolution of 1776, and an alliance that will remain a cornerstone of our security well into the 21st century."

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